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ABSTRACT

It is argued that because the term "dropout" has different meanings in different systems of distance education, it is difficult to compare dropout rates of two or more distance education universities. Two very different European distance education systems, the FernUniversitat in West Germany and the Swedish system, are examined. Background information on each of these systems is followed by a comparison of their methods for assessing dropout rate. The paper concludes with a list of various institutional aspects that must be taken into consideration if dropout rates are to be compared between distance education institutions, including: (1) the level of education offered by the institution; (2) the subjects offered and the specific content of those subjects; (3) the teaching methods employed; (4) whether the institution offers a degree system or a course system; (5) the goals of students; (6) the admission policy; (7) the entrance qualifications; (8) the enrollment policy; (9) the method for counting students; (10) the types of students who study at the institution; (11) the nature of the selection criteria; (12) the pacing of study; (13) the examination system; and (14) the availability of student support. (18 references) (GL)

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Drop-out

Problems of comparing drop-out in different distance education systems

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In our experience, one of the questions invariably asked by any visitor to a Distance Teaching University (DTU) concerns the drop-out rate. We believe that everybody who works in the field of distance education has had the same experience. We seldom heard that visitors to conventional universities ask the same question, although at these universities many students do not finish with a degree.

We agree with Woodley and Parlett (1983) that "the term 'drop-out' is used very loosely and means different things to different people." To this we would like to add that the term means different things in different systems of distance education, because distance education is determined by the framework of national educational systems. This makes it very complicated to compare drop-out rates of two or more DTU's. Furthermore, you have to consider that "different methods of counting students can imply very different interpretations of completion rates -even though the formulae by which such rates are calculated are ostensibly identical" (Shale 1982). Elgqvist-Saltzman (1976) pointed out that "the value of an estimation of general drop-out numbers was questioned since there were various patterns in different subjects and in various student groups." Important in this context are the study goals of the students because different study behavior is the result of different study goals. The fact that different distance education systems require different entrance qualifications and offer different levels of tertiary education also contributes to divergent drop-out statistics. Other reasons "why the number of drop-outs in distance education varies so widely" (Willén 1981) are differences in the students' educational backgrounds and in the institutions' teaching methods. Another important point to mention is that the degrees offered do not have the same level or the same value at different DTU's.

It can here be interesting to look at two very different DTU systems in Europe, applying the method of contrasting comparisons to the West-German FernUniversität and the Swedish system of distance education. First it is necessary to give a short description of the two educational systems into which distance education is integrated.

FernUniversität

The only DTU in the Federal Republic of Germany, the FernUniversität, was founded in 1974. Like the conventional universities, the FernUniversität is open to different groups of students. In the Federal Republic of Germany graduation from a secondary school (usually the 'Gymnasium') after thirteen years constitutes the formal university entrance qualification, the 'Abitur', at the age of 19 to 20 years. With this formal entrance qualification you can study at any of the conventional universities or at the FernUniversität. The only difference to the conventional universities lies in the fact that the FernUniversität is aimed at people in full-time employment who cannot attend a conventional university because of their occupational and/or private situation. Depending on their previous qualifications and future goals students can register as full-time students, part-time students, visiting students or guest students. Full-time students, part-time students and some visiting students ('Studiengangszweithörer')

study for a degree at the FernUniversität such as a 'Diplom', Master of Arts, or a State Examination. Full-time students have to study six or eight semesters, part-time students twelve or sixteen semesters, depending on their workload. Visiting students are normally registered at another university and study at the FernUniversität in order to complement their course of studies there. Guest students are not required to have a formal entrance qualification but they also cannot get a degree at the FernUniversität. They may complete individual courses in order to advance their own education.

As Keegan (1982) pointed out, "the theoretical underpinnings of the FernUniversität are based on the view that distance education and oral, conventional education are similar." The FernUniversität teaches the same subjects, the same courses with the same level of difficulties as the conventional universities. The differences lie in the different teaching mode and student support system, namely that the FernUniversität teaches mainly with written study material sent to the students by mail. The conventional universities teach the same subjects on the same level but in the oral mode. For the academic staff of the FernUniversität it always has been an unrenouncable condition that there should be no differences in the standards of achievement in comparison to the conventional universities. The following statement of a professor to his students illustrates this very well:

"Many students did not achieve their study aim, that means they failed the written exams at the end of a course or they failed the exams of the 'Diplom'. In the fall of 1984 the results of the written exams for the Statistics course in the 'Hauptstudium' are especially bad. To assure that the 'Diplom' of the FernUniversität will maintain its present high reputation in the future, we cannot lower our standards of achievement only to have more 'acceptable' failure-rates. Instead, we have to endeavor together to prepare the participants in the exams in a better way" (Gruber 1984). Behind this statement we can see the whole philosophy of the FernUniversität and also of the West-German conventional universities. It is not 'bad' for the professor or for the university if a large number of students do not pass the exams, because they have to guarantee that an imaginary standard in their subject is achieved. This background information may help to understand the discussion about the elite in the Federal Republic of Germany. A growing part of the university professors, the government, and the top-managers of private industry are of the opinion that we have too many students with a medium level but not enough with a top level. They argue that the industrial society needs more people with a very high educational standard. From this point of view high drop-out rates are a good sign that the university has a high standard and works in the right way. In consequence, the government is planning a change in the law applicable to universities in order to facilitate the special promotion of a so-called 'elite' among the students.

Distance education at Swedish universities

An important educational goal in Sweden during recent years has been to increase the accessibility of higher education, making recurrent education available even for employed adults living

out of reach of the university towns. Part-time evening classes, decentralized university education and distance education are some of the means of achieving this goal (Dahllöf, Kim & Willén 1978). New entrance requirements for the university have been introduced (Kim 1978, Kim & Simon 1978). This allows adults over the age of 25 who have been employed for at least four years, to study certain subjects at the university, even though they do not fulfil the formal requirements.

A major portion of Swedish undergraduate education is organized into about 100 general study programs and these programs vary in length from one to five and a half years. Separate single-subject courses are short-cycle study programs designed mainly to meet the need for further education or advanced professional training and each university decides which courses to offer.

Everyone who applies for entrance to a general program or a separate course must satisfy both general and special entrance requirements. The special entrance requirements are expressed in terms of Swedish secondary school courses. However, these qualifications do not guarantee admission. Since the reform in 1977 all courses of study have a limited number of available places and a selection must be made on the basis of the applicants' qualifications. Both the applicants' school results and their experience of working life are taken into consideration. The same conditions applied to distance courses even before 1977, since the number of places was limited due to the experimental activities which were taking place.

Universities and colleges offer a large number of separate courses. Many such courses are simply fundamental courses in traditional university subjects. Apart from the fee payable to the Students' Union, all studies at universities and colleges are free.

The Swedish model for distance education is highly decentralized. The responsibility for carrying out distance education rests with the individual university departments, which at the same time organize other forms of university education. Distance education thus is regarded as a supplementary form of study parallel to evening classes and local external courses.

The distance program is based mainly on self-studies as are traditional university studies in general. In order to overcome distance and to increase teacher-student contact, residential schools, telephone service and audio-cassettes are used. In the decentralized model in Sweden the contact between student and teacher is an essential feature. Meeting at the university and the use of the telephone have been the main methods of establishing contact (Willén 1981, 1984 b). Every study-year the Swedish universities offer around 400 distance courses.

Differences between the two systems

As we can see, there are a number of important and fundamental differences between these two DTU systems. In the following we will confront these differences in a table.

FernUniversität	Sweden
- centralized	- decentralized
- formal entrance qualification for all those students who are taking a degree course; other students do not need the formal entrance qualification	- formal entrance qualification or fulfilling the new entrance requirements for the universities (age of 25 and 4 years of employment)
- degree system	- credit system
- full-time and part-time students are studying in a course of studies to get a degree	- most of the students are studying single courses
- giving working people with the 'Abitur' the chance to get a degree	- giving education to new groups

Definitions

At the FernUniversität we have worked in the past with the following definition of dropping out: Drop-out rates are that proportion of full-time and part-time students in a cohort who were enrolled in a given academic year in a fixed course of studies but who discontinued their study before completing all the exams required for the degree. This narrow definition of drop-out was misleading in so far as students may be included who have not in fact left the FernUniversität. Students are assigned a new identification number on changing their status, i.e. when changing from part-time to full-time studying etc. For administrative purposes, such students are considered drop-outs on the one hand and newly-registered students on the other. In addition, a few of the drop-outs of the FernUniversität have continued their studies at a conventional university. For the purposes of our discussion they are considered drop-outs because they have discontinued their distance studies.

In Sweden the phenomena of drop-out and pass-rates have been widely discussed. There are nowadays no official definitions or guidelines to help planners or researchers when working with these concepts. The only clear criterion here is that a course worth 20 points will be taken over a period of 20 weeks. Dahllöf (1977) has pointed out "that criteria should be used which are consistent with the goals of the different student-groups themselves and are not applied in a mechanical way according to the administrators' preconceptions of other people's motives."

Study results

A number of investigations in the area of higher education have demonstrated the difficulty of measuring accurately the effectivity of education from the available exam statistics. A main problem are the number of early drop-outs, because many of these are not due to failure, but are rather a sign that the student has been accepted for another, more desirable course (Elgqvist-Saltzman

1976). As regards distance education and separate courses at Swedish universities for older students, one could argue that the number of alternatives is limited, but one must not forget that university circles organized by the educational associations may be a feasible alternative, and it is not always clear at the beginning of a term whether these will take place or not. Statistics of those studying at a slower rate have been analyzed in Sweden, to a much lesser degree than statistics of full-time students. The gross figures for the latter are usually relatively low and a more definite picture of results is obtained first after submitting the material to a detailed analysis. There was, therefore, no reason in the evaluation of distance education, to expect anything other than low figures until a corresponding, special analysis had been undertaken. In the evaluation we assumed that there was no reason to have greater expectations of distance education than any other form of higher education that is conducted at a slower pace and addressed to working adults. In general, results from previous investigations in the Faculty of Arts showed that 50 percent or more of those who actively pursue studies completed there studies within the allotted time. One problem was that we had no adequate comparison group. But the evaluation (Willén 1981, 1983, 1984 a) showed clearly that the success-rates were surprisingly high in the distance courses. Of all the students who had started a given course, 58 percent had successfully passed the exams. When the inactive students, who never started or else dropped out very early, are discounted the pass-rate is 65 percent. The pass-rates varied considerably between the different subjects. Seventeen subjects out of 42 had a pass-rate higher than 65 percent. Twenty-point coures had better results than shorter courses. There were almost no general differences between students with a different educational background.

In a follow-up investigation, five years after the commencement of distance studies, we saw that there was one group of distance students who needed a long time to complete their studies. The number of passes increased from 65 percent to 76 percent. This result shows that a comparatively large number returned to studies after a long interval and took their exams.

Most of the students at the FernUniversität do not pass the final exams because they drop out in the beginning of their studying. The pass-rates of the students studying the course of studies Economics was highest for the students who registered in the founding year 1975/76. Twenty percent of the full-time students got the 'Diplom'. For the following academic years the pass-rate has dropped. We now expect pass-rates of approximately 15 percent. The pass-rate for the part-time students is lower than that for the full-time students. A large percentage of those students who registered in the period from 1975/76 to 1978/79 are still studying for a degree. In total 12 percent of the part-time students are expected to pass the final exams at the FernUniversität. The basis for the calculation of the pass-rates for each student-category in every course of studies is the total number of registered students in a given academic year.

Discussion

As you can see, the way to handle the drop-out calculation differs in the investigations from the FernUniversität and the Swedish distance education system. For example: in the Swedish investigation the non-starters are identified and there are a number of other DTU's which do not count the non-starters as students (Hall 1984, Rekkedal 1982). The drop-out rate in this cases is of course lower and the pass-rates higher than in cases where the non-starters are counted as registered students.

We can look at the non-starter problem also out of another point of view. The number of staff and the funds for the production and delivery of the study material, for example, are in the long run not independent of the total number of registered students. The West-German government, for example, would probably give much less money to the FernUniversität if the university were to include only the active students in its statistics. The inactive or not very active students also create costs because the university has to provide the same facilities for them as for the fully active students. We agree that non-starters pose a problem in distance education. We believe that in general we should make this problem more transparent in our statistics.

There are a lot of problems with calculating pass-rates/dropping out rates, but we do not think it is useful to look only at the statistical figures. For us educators it must be of the utmost importance to get information and an understanding of the students' situation. If we know that a lot of students never start to study, or drop out very early, we must of course examine, why they have made such a decision and see if we can change their situation. This must be of utmost importance for the students, the teachers, and the educational organization.

In the following we will try to discuss some selected institutional aspects which must be taken into consideration if drop-out rates between DTU's are to be compared.

- Which *level* of education is offered by the DTU? Does the DTU work at university level (B.A., Diplom etc.) or is the standard lower?
- Which *subjects* does the DTU offer? Different subjects have different success-rates because the level of abstraction differs from subject to subject.
- Which *contents* do the offered subjects include? The contents depend on the standard of the curriculum.
- Which *method of teaching* dominates? Is the method of teaching student centered or not? What does a given method mean for the students' chances to succeed?
- Does the DTU offer a *course system* or a *degree system*?
- Which *courses of studies* does the DTU offer?
- Which *kind of degree* do students get after successful studying?
- Which are the *goals of the students*? Do the students intended to get a degree?
- What kind of *admission policy* does the DTU have? Is it an open

admission policy or not?

- What kind of *entrance qualifications* do the students need for studying at the DTU? Are there differences to conventional universities?
- What kind of *enrollment policy* does the DTU have? Is there a distinction of provisional and/or effective enrollments?
- How does the DTU *count the number of its students*? Are non-starters counted as students or are they excluded from the statistics?
- Which *types of students* study at the DTU? Depending on the subjects offered, a DTU tends to attract different types of students. Therefore it is important to know the student characteristics.
- Is there a *limited number of available places* at the DTU? Which kind of selection criteria does the DTU apply?
- Do the students have to pay *fees* for studying at a distance? What kind of financial assistance is available?
- Do the students work in a *paced or flexible deadline system*? Does the DTU take into consideration the life-situation of the students?
- Which kind of *exam system* exists? Which kind of exam procedure exists? Is there a credit system?
- Which *student support system* exists?

In our opinion, a comparision of drop-out rates at different DTU's requires information along the lines of the above catalogue. Unless details on each item specified are given, a comparision would have no real value due to different reference systems. Most often you'd compare "apples with pears" if you compare the drop-out rates without providing information about the bases of your comparisions. We do not argue against research into dropping out to be carried out at individual DTU's. Such research is really necessary in order to see how successfully the university works. But we think it would be more valuable to have a comparative, holistic research strategy, to evaluate pass-rates and drop-out rates in a wider, international context. This will lead to a better understanding and provide a broader foundation for the explanation of figures gained at individual universities.

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